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## Chapter 14

# **‘Sometimes I Feel More Moroccan than Dutch’: Identity and Belonging in Second-Generation Iranian-Dutch Women**

*Leila Kian and Halleh Ghorashi*

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – With political tensions surrounding migrants in post-9/11 Western societies, scholarship on second-generation immigrants has surged. This study explores the narratives of second-generation Iranian-Dutch women, a previously unstudied group, in relation to their positionality regarding identity and belonging.

**Methodology/Approach** – By combining focus group discussions with in-depth individual interviews, we explored the narratives of 13 second-generation Iranian-Dutch women. Our focus was on their senses of belonging, cultural identities and lived experiences as they navigated between Dutch society and their parents’ complicated heritage, against the backdrop of the post-9/11 world.

**Findings** – Although these women are perfectly ‘integrated’, they are still frequently approached and labelled as ‘foreigners’ in society, which negatively impacts their sense of belonging in Dutch society. However, our participants navigated contradicting parental and societal expectations, finding new ways to belong and fashioning cultural identities in multiplicity.

**Originality/Value of the Paper** – To our knowledge, the specific experiences of second-generation Iranian-Dutch migrants have received no scholarly attention. Our findings further the understanding on relevant second-generation themes such as the immigrant

bargain, solidarity between different ethnic minority groups, and new ways of belonging.

**Keywords:** Belonging; othering; identity positionings; in-betweenness; Iranian-Dutch; second-generation Iranians

## Introduction

Between the events of 9/11 and Europe's current refugee crisis, a political atmosphere marked by the exclusion and othering of immigrants has become endemic to Europe. This pattern is highly pronounced in the Netherlands, where negative attitudes towards the culture and religion of migrants – in particular Islamic migrants – visibly intensified at the turn of the century. The political murders of two Dutch Islam critics (politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004) added fuel to this growing negativity. These events seemed to awaken a latent discomfort towards migrants within Dutch society, which [Entzinger \(2003, p. 71\)](#) refers to as the feelings of 'a silent majority tired of multiculturalism'. In turn, different migrant groups had their own distinctive responses to this shift in atmosphere. While this context has stimulated academic inquiry into the larger ethnic minority groups of Turkish and Moroccan descent, less attention has been paid to smaller minority groups, such as the Iranian-Dutch.

Iranians are a relatively 'new' migrant group in the Netherlands, their largest influxes being prompted by the revolution of 1979, and decades later by the Green Movement of 2009.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, research has predominantly centred on the struggles, experiences and achievements of these first generations of migrants and political refugees ([Ghorashi, 2003a](#); [Te Lindert, Korzilius, Van de Vijver, Kroon, & Arends-Tóth, 2008](#); [Verkuyten & Nekuee, 1999](#)). Now, however, there is a generation of Iranian-Dutch who were born or have come of age in the Netherlands. This generation has navigated between Dutch society and their parents' complicated heritage, against the shifting backdrop of the pre- and post-9/11 world.

Contrary to the impressive body of scholarship on second-generation Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch citizens ([Crul, Schneider, & Lelie,](#)

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<sup>1</sup>The 'Iranian Green Movement' denotes the months-long massive street protests following the Iranian presidential election of 2009.

2012; Eijberts, 2013; Omlo, 2011; Slootman, 2014; Van der Raad, 2013), not much is known about second-generation Iranian-Dutch people in the Netherlands. This study begins to fill this knowledge gap by mapping experiences of second-generation Iranian-Dutch women in the Netherlands. How do they describe their sense of belonging in Dutch society? How do they understand the multiple cultures and identities they are part of? What societal and intergenerational tensions are typical of their experience? In addressing such questions, we aim to contribute to the larger body of research on the complexities of belonging and identity for second-generation migrants in post-9/11 Europe.

### **The Second Generation: Struggles of Identity and Belonging**

While coming of age and fashioning an identity, second-generation immigrants navigate between often-divergent parental and societal expectations. They have therefore been described as ‘translation artists’, who struggle with learning to meet these differing, sometimes contradictory expectations (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In Rumbaut’s (2005) words, the second generation deals with:

the juggling of competing allegiances and attachments. Situated within [at least] two cultural worlds, they must define themselves in relation to multiple reference groups (sometimes in two countries and in two languages) and to the classifications into which they are placed by their native peers, the schools, the ethnic community, and the larger society. (p. 304)

The multiple identity positions this generation inhabits from a young age give them the potential to be resilient masters ‘of several cultural repertoires that they can selectively deploy in response to the opportunities and challenges they face’ (Levitt, 2009, p. 1226). Yet the capacity to negotiate this multiplicity of identity positions differs per migrant group and generation. That is, the capacities of first- and second-generation immigrants to face challenges are contingent on their resources, support networks, opportunities and their host society. Societally inclusive environments with accessible opportunities are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging in migrants (Anthias, 2006). Societal exclusion, however, increases the tension between various aspects of one’s identity – one’s self-image and attributed image (Wekker, 1998) – resulting in a decreased sense of emotional connectedness and belonging to a society.

Thus, belonging ties into identity, which we define as a narrative of the self. This narrative is in flux: it is a changing view of the self and the other that constantly acquires new meanings and forms. These meanings take shape through interactions with social structures and within historical moments (see also [Giddens, 1991](#)). This relational process of identity formation includes both the approval and the rejection of different levels of identification. In this way, context has a direct impact on the changing configuration of multiple identities within the narrative of the self (see also [Ghorashi, 2003b](#)). Identity narratives are thus positioned within intersections of discourses that have been salient in one's life. This means that salient societal discourses are essential to how individuals construct their multiple identity positionings, while also impacting individuals' feelings of emotional connectedness or belonging to the contexts they are part of.

These discussions on identity and belonging highlight that second-generation immigrants' experiences are highly intertwined with societal and political discourses. Consequently, central themes in the lives of many second-generation immigrants often include the search for identity, struggles of belonging, navigating between culturally different worlds and the contrasting images and expectations of society and family.

## **Method**

Due to the study's explorative nature, we chose to combine in-depth individual interviews with focus group discussions. The interviews had a biographical angle, enabling a focus on participants' lived experiences through the intersection of time and space. This helped us understand participants' perspectives in the dynamic and multilayered manner in which they were presented. It also helped us grasp participants' processes of negotiation, in the past and the present, providing a picture of their multiplicity of experiences and challenges. Combining interviews and focus group discussions enabled us to consider inconsistencies and continuities between what was said in individual interviews and what emerged from interactive group discussions. The focus group discussions also allowed the interviewer to be less dominantly present, thereby allowing more space for the experiences and opinions of the participants ([Madriz, 2000](#)).

The participants were 13 second-generation Iranian-Dutch women aged 23–33 years. Each was assigned to either a focus group or an

individual interview, hence there was no overlap between the two. The selection criteria were that they were either born in the Netherlands or arrived with their parent(s) before the age of 12, that both parents were Iranian. Our decision to focus exclusively on women was inspired by earlier studies with first-generation Iranian-Dutch women (Ghorashi, 2003a, 2018, forthcoming) in which they referred to their daughters' challenges and achievements in Dutch society. This was the initial driver behind the current study, and limiting the gender to women allowed us to focus on the generational specificities of the narratives. Most participants lived in Amsterdam and all were residents of urban areas. They were approached through the researchers' own networks, and through the snowball method, using online platforms, such as Facebook.

During the summers of 2014 and 2015, we conducted two focus group discussions and five in-depth individual interviews. Both focus groups consisted of four participants and one moderator. Focus group discussions lasted two to three hours. They took place in a rented space in Amsterdam, with Lebanese snacks, drinks and a warm atmosphere providing a comfortable and safe backdrop for discussion. The individual interviews, conducted in Amsterdam cafés, took approximately an hour. The interviews and focus groups were designed to be as open as possible so there would be enough space for additional details and elaboration prompted by participant responses.

At the outset of each interview and group discussion, participants chose whether to answer questions in Dutch, Persian or English, or a combination of these. The two focus group discussions were conducted mainly in Dutch, with Persian used intermittently throughout. One individual interview was conducted mainly in English, another mainly in Persian and three mainly in Dutch. All interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The recordings were deleted after transcription, and transcripts were subsequently translated into English. For privacy reasons, some of the participants' names have been changed in the transcripts. With only two focus groups and five in-depth individual interviews, it is not our intention to provide a representative picture of the second-generation Iranian-Dutch female experience. Nevertheless, the format and scope allowed us to take the first steps in mapping out recurring patterns for future research.

The remainder of this chapter discusses where the participants of our study stand in relation to the themes of belonging, cultural identity and intergenerational relationships. We begin with discussing a theme that marked most participants' intergenerational relationships: high parental expectations.

## The Immigrant Bargain

Similar to other middle-class migrants, first-generation Iranians have high expectations of achievement for their children. The second generation is expected to be hardworking and successful, both educationally and professionally (Bozorgmehr & Douglas, 2011; Higgins, 2004; Shavarini, 2004). This was no different among our participants. Yalda explained that, when she decided to study sociology, her father was shocked and said, ‘but you can’t become a lawyer with that study ... or a doctor’. To which Nasim, another interviewee, jokingly responded, ‘the only two professions that exist in an Iranian mind-set’. This brief exchange between Yalda and Nasim illustrates a shared perspective among all participants: that the desire to excel in ‘prestigious’ careers is typically Iranian, and especially characteristic of the intellectual middle class of their parents’ generation. As Sania put it, ‘[f]or us [Iranians] it’s so important to be successful that it comes naturally, it’s just how we are raised’.

All participants framed this culturally: as a typically ‘Iranian thing’. However, in migration scholarship, the stories they shared are reminiscent of ‘the immigrant bargain’. Sociologist Robert Smith (2005) coined this term to denote the expectation that immigrant parents’ struggles and sacrifices will be repaid by their children’s successes and achievements. Smith (2005) explains that ‘[w]hile such a bargain occurs in most families, immigrant and nonimmigrant, the life-defining sacrifices of migration convert it into a tale of moral worth or failure’ (p. 126). For example, Mexican-American parents will say:

[w]e sacrificed our homeland, struggled with English, and lived in fear of the Migra [the immigration authorities] so you would have a better life in New York. All we ask in return is that you succeed in school and at work. (Smith, 2005)

Most of our participants, it turns out, had heard something very similar to this from their Iranian parents.

Although we had not included the topic in our research questions, this theme kept resurfacing in nearly all interviews and group discussions. Overall, participants had an ambivalent relationship with keeping their end of the bargain. Though they frequently expressed great appreciation for the first generations’ struggles and sacrifices, many felt pushed and misunderstood. Let us first look at why they were often willing to meet their end of the bargain. Many participants felt strengthened by their

parents' attitude. It had made them more resilient in Dutch society. For example, during a discussion on the discrimination of people of colour in the job market, Maral noted:

Our parents ... they knew this ... that's why they push you so hard ... what did they see? They saw their highly educated friends from Iran standing in shops and driving cabs here ... they didn't push us for nothing ... it's our reality, I experience it at work, you just have to be more, something extra, prove yourself much more.

In other words, the intergenerational agreement to work hard and succeed was seen as an effective pathway to survive as immigrants in Dutch society. To varying degrees, participants had internalized this drive. However, they often took issue with what they perceived as the first generations' very narrow definition of success. In their study of the upward mobility of second-generation Iranian-Americans, [Bozorgmehr and Douglas \(2011\)](#) stated that '[t]he second generation internalizes these values and becomes very motivated to excel in school and to choose professional occupations which will garner them respect in the Iranian community' (p. 5). This statement however, did not apply to our participants. The participants all rejected the 'doctor, lawyer or engineer' straightjacket. Or, as Sharie called it, 'the Iranian obsession with prestige'. The women frequently mentioned this perspective on success to be 'odd', 'ridiculous' and a source of intergenerational tensions. Roxanne offered an example of how this tension plays out in practice and the confusion that comes with it:

When I wanted to attend the dance academy, she [my mother] told me, "But wait, you're not going to become a dancer. I didn't bring you to the Netherlands for you to become a dancer. What am I supposed to tell people?" Like ... that idea of becoming a dancer ... in her experience ... and that is very much an Iranian perspective ... it's associated with lower culture. But at the same time she very much has this attitude ... like ... we came here to be free and to integrate here, and be here. Like "you should make use of your freedom." But so ... very paradoxical.

Roxanne went further, suggesting that 'it's a norm in the first generation ... that you need to be extremely successful. It's really a norm ... and I'm incredibly allergic to it'.



Thus, most of the women kept their end of the bargain by being well educated and successful. All participants, however, rejected the notion of restricting oneself to typically ‘prestige-garnering’ occupations. Among the participants were a documentary maker, a journalist, a DJ, a sociologist: being successful was important to them, but the prestige of certain careers was not. Furthermore, many stories indicated that the immigrant bargain, as the participants have experienced it, surpasses the mere expectation that the second generation will be successful. It also involves the parents’ expectations for their children to be happy and positive. With large and lively hand gestures, Sara vividly enacted the way her mother responds whenever she notices that Sara is unhappy: ‘I left my country so you could be happy, I sacrificed everything for you, I suffered so that you don’t have to suffer’. With laughter and seriousness combined, Sara explained:

Iranian parents just don’t get how incredibly difficult it is for us. They also think that just because we speak the language [Dutch] fluently and know how everything works, we won’t be discriminated against or othered. They want us to feel like we’re in paradise so that our super ... like our super-happiness will compensate for all the misery they’ve endured.

In line with a great deal of literature on intergenerational tension in migrant families, the majority of our participants did not experience the immigrant bargain as merely good or bad, as only pressure or only a blessing (Foner & Dreby, 2011; Louie, 2012; Smith, 2005). Almost everyone emphasized that their parents did not provide much emotional support for their struggles. However, most participants felt very appreciative of the first generation. Furthermore, most felt that they were more resilient and better able to face societal challenges because of the first generation’s drive and motivation.

## **Negotiating the Dutch Discourse on Migrants**

There are a multitude of perspectives on immigrants in the Netherlands. The trend in recent decades, however, has been towards an increasingly negative, hostile dominant discourse. In the 1980s, the image of the Netherlands as an open, tolerant society that embraced a diversity of cultures was dominant (Ghorashi, 2018, forthcoming; Scholten, 2007). Cracks began to emerge in this image from the 1990s onwards. In 1998,

there was a turn towards mandatory civic integration (Joppke, 2004), which was considered a shift towards assimilation (Vasta, 2007). After 9/11 the multicultural Netherlands image ruptured. The ‘cultural others’ who resided in the nation but were merely tolerated from a distance, were now considered a potential threat to the society, an ‘enemy within’. There was no space left for tolerance; it was replaced with fear, anger and outrage (Ghorashi, 2014). The 2004 murder of the filmmaker and columnist Theo van Gogh by a young Moroccan-Dutch man provided new fuel for an even more extreme negative emphasis on Islam, questioning the position of Islamic migrants in the Netherlands. A country with a long-standing self-image combining multicultural promise with openness, tolerance and liberalness became increasingly fearful and protective of its ‘national identity’ (Duyvendak, Engelen, & De Haan, 2008), resulting in more restricted policies towards migrants.

When asked about the integration debate in the Netherlands, participants were in complete agreement: none had a positive word to say about the dominant discourse on migrants in the Netherlands. Participants described the discourse as negative, repetitive, stereotypical, hostile and superficial. About half could vividly recall how this discourse had intensified in the years following 9/11. That atmosphere had affected most of them personally. Even so, most emphasized that their situation was incomparable to how the Moroccan-Dutch were treated in society, media and politics. However, all but two of the women expressed a form of solidarity with the Moroccan-Dutch. Maral’s story serves as an illustration:

I have this close friend Nadia, she’s Moroccan, and always when we go out, and get into conversation with someone, the first thing they always say is exactly that ... “Oh, how is it possible that you [Maral] are doing so well, and that you [Nadia] are not integrated while those Iranians are doing so well, how does that work?” Or they ask, “Shall we have another beer?” and then they immediately assume that I as an Iranian will drink beer, but Nadia of course won’t. Ooooh it’s sooo .... Frustrating! And, in those moments, I feel more Moroccan than Dutch.

Concurring with Maral, Amine noted that:

Now that I’m surrounded by Moroccans, and see what they have to endure ... Because you don’t really know unless

you're around them, it's actually really a form of suffering, what those parents and children go through ... like you [Maral] said, I feel more of a connection with Moroccans than with the Dutch.

Yalda mentioned this point as well during one focus group:

There are such negative stereotypes in the media ... especially toward Moroccans. I can sometimes imagine that, when a certain group is always represented so negatively, that at some point you think, OK, I'm trying so hard, and you still reject me.

Nasim: "Then f\*\*k it." Yalda continued: "Yes, exactly." These quotes illustrate a pattern that kept recurring: their connection to the Moroccan-Dutch was established through an understanding of how exclusionary the Dutch dominant discourse can be. It came from dealing with the process of othering that excludes and stigmatizes all ethnic minorities – albeit to varying degrees and in different ways.

Similarly, almost all participants mentioned the Black Pete tradition in connection with the typical racism of the white Dutch majority. Black Pete is a highly controversial caricature that appears during the Dutch winter holidays. Every year, the Dutch version of Santa – Saint Nicholas – arrives on a steamboat, accompanied by dozens of clown-like, fun-loving blackfaced servants known as 'Black Petes'. Despite activists' and scholars' decades-long attempts to address this practice as racist, the dominant trend has been to deny racism and to tell (black) minorities to stop ruining an innocent children's celebration (Smith, 2014). What connected participants' personal experiences of being othered to hostility against Muslims and attachment to the Black Pete tradition was a white Dutch majority unwilling to reflect on its own racist perspectives and practices. As Sara explained:

Of course, the white majority that is willing to defend a racist colonial caricature, even after years of debate and black pain, they still say, hands off our traditions ... do you think those people will ever empathize with us?

Niloe wondered whether the native Dutch majority was beginning to reflect on its own blind spots because of the surge in critical perspectives in recent years: on racism, Islamophobia, Black Pete and the lack of inclusiveness and diversity in media and organizations. Maral concurred:

Once someone in the public sphere says something, you have a group of people that start questioning and criticizing it ... like Quincy Gario with the Black Pete discussion, and Zihni Ozdil about institutional racism ... you know what I mean? There's a lot more discussion and criticism aimed at the racist attitude of the Dutch majority.

Niloe was not the only one with this perspective. Most of our participants sensed great potential in this growing voice in the Netherlands addressing race and racism in public debates and academia. Roxanne was hopeful about the change this was bringing about in the Dutch majority:

Look at what has emerged at the UvA [University of Amsterdam] now, like ... the University of Color. Things like that ... and people of color ... they talk a lot more ... discuss these issues with each other. There is a growing discourse about these issues and, because of that, more visibility for these issues. And I also think there is a generation of Dutch people nowadays ... young Dutch people ... who want to bridge that gap. And I think there is a real transformation going on there. I think there is a lot more awareness on both sides.

In sum, this section reflects the complexities of identification and solidarity that these Iranian-Dutch women have. The exclusionary discourse has affected the second generation's lives and their sites of identification. The fact that Amine says 'I feel more of a connection with Moroccans than with the Dutch' is quite telling. These Iranian-Dutch women connect to the Moroccan-Dutch, who are often depicted as being 'problematic others', based on a shared experience of being othered in Dutch society. What then is their own relationship to Dutch society in terms of their identity and sense of belonging? The next section will address this question.

## Locations of Belonging: Where is Home?

Questions of belonging can be even more alive in the minds and lives of the second generation compared to their parents (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2008). In this chapter, we explicitly connect the sense of belonging to certain locations in which people say they feel at home. Mostly, participants said they feel like they belong to the Netherlands. A few participants said they felt like they belonged to Iran. This was, however, more often formulated in terms of their cultural identity than in terms of belonging to the country of Iran. When specifying what it actually means to belong, however, most of the women did not display a very strong sense of national belonging in general. Rather, their accounts of belonging often gravitated around a more local sphere: the city they lived in (mostly Amsterdam). Their familiarity with the city was a central tenet in these accounts: familiarity with the streets, with how things work, with places where memories have been formed and social encounters taken place. Their emotional connection to the city constituted much of what it meant to belong somewhere. Sania described a sense of comfort and freedom when returning from vacation in Iran, stepping on her scooter and driving through the familiar streets of Amsterdam in bliss. Another interviewee, Sharie, put it this way:

The people that I love, the way of life that I love, the freedom that is available to me ... All of that is right here. And that feeling is strongly linked to Amsterdam. I couldn't live anywhere else in the Netherlands. I mean I tried to live in Hoorn for six months but uhm ... hahaha ... no! It's Amsterdam.

Occasionally participants spoke not only as if they belonged to the city but also as if the city belonged to them. While sharing such an example Sharie's eyes lit up and, with a broad smile on her face, she said:

You know, like, this café in Amsterdam, this gin café ... I've been frequenting the place for maybe twenty years now. And when people come to visit me I always take them there. And I feel like it's a part of my heritage, it's a part of me. And I'm proud when I can show it to others.

Such formation of a strong sense of local belonging in a larger city is not an unusual finding among the second generation. For example, second-generation Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch people report high

levels of belonging to the cities they live in (Amsterdam and Rotterdam), even when they have a very weak sense of belonging to the Netherlands (Van Bochove, Rusinovic, & Engbersen, 2010; Van der Welle, 2011). This is not only because of familiarity: the fact that the larger cities are culturally and ethnically diverse factors into feeling at home. In Slootman and Duyvendak's (2015, p. 160) words, 'for the second generation in general, identification with the city is stronger than identification with the Dutch nation, partly because the local identity is seen as more inclusive and open to diversity'. Our participants' accounts certainly testify to this. They often described smaller cities and towns in the Netherlands as 'terrifying' and 'racist'. In sum, belonging was defined as a local rather than a national experience.

### **Experiences of Exclusion and Inclusion**

In their stories, our participants clearly indicated that their struggles with their sense of belonging were related to experiences of being othered. Two participants who did not strongly experience being othered, also struggled much less with their sense of belonging in the Netherlands. Most respondents, however, had a much harder time. A straightforward example of this came from Yasmine. She explained how her initial childhood desire to belong to Dutch society had eventually diminished due to her experiences of being othered:

Why do I hate the Netherlands so much? Because, from the first day I set foot here as a child, I never ever had the feeling that I was allowed to be part of them. That I could ever be considered Dutch. They always asked me stupid questions, like, do all the people in your country travel on camels? ... You know, you're constantly confronted with dumb and insulting questions about your country, about yourself, your religion. And you're constantly confirmed in the feeling that you are different, you are other, you are not really part of ... just imagine you like someone or you're in love with someone and that person keeps hurting and rejecting you. Eventually that love turns into hate or resentment.

A great deal of research supports Yasmine's narrative. As mentioned earlier, many studies have shown that feeling included in society is crucial to migrants' sense of belonging (Fangen, Hammaren, & Johansson, 2012),

while exclusion has the opposite effect. This is certainly true for our respondents. With the exception of the two participants who did not experience much othering in general, most examples of nonbelonging were directly connected to how participants were perceived, described or treated by others. This relationship between exclusion/othering and belonging became all the more evident when participants recounted instances where they had experienced the opposite: the impact of feeling included. Maral gave a striking illustration:

The strangest thing is, I've never felt like I belonged, like I was home, as much as when I lived in New York with students from all over the world. What I loved so much is that other people weren't trying to label me there. They didn't ask me, are you Muslim? ... are you from Iran? why did your parents leave the country? ... when people don't ask you those questions, then you finally feel like a human being, just a human being. People don't have a preconceived image of you ... your character. The person that you are is the image they will have of you.

That last sentence eloquently describes how a sense of belonging flourishes in the moment of convergence between self-image and attributed image. In response to Maral's story, Amine shared the following:

I feel that in Latin America. When I arrive there, I immediately feel like I'm home. My appearance blends in ... people don't ask all those questions. Also not with their eyes. You know you can feel it, see it, here, when people see you and have questions in their eyes ... maybe it's also my own perception, I don't know, but there, in Latin America, I can let go.

Amine's remarks raise the question of the role of appearance. That is, these and many other participant remarks hint at a relationship between physical appearance and othering practices in the Netherlands. The next section discusses this theme in more depth.

### **Not Quite White Enough? Embodied Ethnicity**

The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia identified a rise in the number of 'physical and verbal threats being made, particularly

to those visually identifiable as Muslims, in particular women wearing the hijab' (Allen & Nielsen, 2002, p. 16). For first-generation migrants and refugees, other sorts of visible difference, such as language deficiencies and accents, can lead to exclusion (Ghorashi & Van Tilburg, 2006). But for the women in our study, none of these visible aspects of difference were present. They all speak Dutch fluently and without an accent; they are thoroughly socialized into Dutch culture and fluent in Dutch cultural mannerisms and they do not wear explicit Islamic signifiers, such as the hijab. Thus, the women in this study meet all the norms, expectations and criteria for being counted as integrated Dutch citizens. They are well-educated, hijab-less women who are active in society, know the Dutch culture, and speak the language fluently. As such, a number of them reported feeling Dutch and being treated as Dutch by the white majority. Interestingly, however, the majority recounted often being approached as non-Dutch in daily life, purely based on their appearance – what is visibly and physically different about them.

Sharie explained that she had only become aware of how strange it is to continuously be regarded as 'a guest, a newcomer, as not being part of them' after having visited Canada. There, she noticed that people did not automatically respond to her as if she was 'from somewhere else', even though her English proficiency did not compare to her Dutch. In the Netherlands, however, she felt differently:

Even if you've been born and raised here ... you will always remain an "allochtoon" ... it never ends, you know, "Oh, wow, how long have you lived here?" ... "Gosh, you speak Dutch so well" ... "I almost can't hear an accent!" ... hahaha ... you know what I mean? At some point, I'm just sick of hearing those things.

The word Sharie used, *allochtoon*, translates as foreigner and literally means 'not from here'. For decades the word officially<sup>2</sup> referred to those who were born outside the Netherlands or had at least one parent born outside the Netherlands. In practice, however, *allochtoon* would more readily be used to describe a third-generation nonwhite grandchild of immigrants than a newly arrived white German or American 'expat' (Essed & Trienekens, 2008). According to Patricia Schor (2016), in practice,

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<sup>2</sup>On 1 November 2016 the Dutch government stopped using *allochtoon* in its official reports. Retrieved on 1 July 2017 from <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/corporate/2016/43/termen-allochtoon-en-autochtoon-herzien>.



*allochtoon* is a ‘confusing racialised category of otherness [that] stands for the non-white Dutch’. Like Sharie, the women in this study certainly did not enjoy being seen as an *allochtoon* by their peers, their classmates and by strangers on the street. It is blatantly clear to them that an *allochtoon* is ‘never quite Dutch, never quite the norm, always considered as aspiring’ (Essed & Trienekens, 2008, p. 58). The essentialist foundation of this distinction makes it impossible to become a full member of Dutch society through achievement or choice (Geschiere, 2009). Amine expresses this feeling clearly:

I’m not Dutch either, because I have the same dark eyes and dark hair ... because one day they’re going to point at me, and then it won’t matter that I don’t have an accent or celebrate carnival or eat pork ... when that day comes, we all have dark hair.

These findings support the claim that, despite the downplaying and denial of racism in the Netherlands, the culturalist discourse of othering has a clear racial angle (Essed & Hoving, 2014). To have nonwhite or non-European bodily features is associated with being an *allochtoon*. Thus, physical appearance is the basis upon which inferences are made about one’s cultural background. Siebers (2017) is critical of scholars who link the concept of racism to the exclusion, discrimination and othering of immigrants in the Netherlands. Siebers states that the discrimination of migrant groups in the Netherlands is certainly a reality. This reality, however, is related to cultural background (ethnicity) and not race (Siebers, 2017). His main argument is that critical race theories do not apply to the Dutch context, since the Dutch associate racism with the Holocaust. Race is, therefore, not a relevant social category in the Netherlands, he argues, contrary to the United States or Canada.

Our findings, however, in line with numerous reports and studies (Amnesty International, 2013; Amnesty International & Open Society Justice Initiative, 2013; Çankaya, 2015), clearly indicate that inferences about one’s ethnicity and cultural background are based on appearance. This obscures the clear distinction that Siebers seeks to uphold between race and ethnicity. The significance of our participants’ narratives is that they show the embodied side of ethnicity, in which group boundaries are not based merely on constructed notions of common history, culture or language (Barth, 1969) but also on physical traits – in this case, whether people look white or European enough. Thus, there is a strong connection between the ‘culturalization of social relations’ (Anthias, 2006) and

the embodied images that constitute the boundaries between the other and the self.

Prasad and Prasad (2002) argue that the contemporary discourse of othering is informed by ‘the social and cultural construction of a fundamental *ontological* distinction between “the west” and “the non-west”’ (p. 61). The ways that migrants of colour are approached in the present, the authors argue, can be traced to the colonial legacy, that was based on a superior western self and an inferior ‘ethnic’ other. Wekker (2016) concurs, by arguing that we should situate contemporary attitudes towards people of colour and migrants in the Netherlands in the context of 400 years of Dutch colonial legacy that created a ‘cultural archive’ that animates and informs the present in ways that we need to further analyse and unpack (Wekker, 2016).

### **Identity Positionings and Embracing Multiplicity**

As the second generation comes of age, learning about and moving through different worlds, they often have mixed feelings about their identity and their place in the world. And although conceptually different, the issue of belonging strongly overlapped with questions of identity in participants’ stories, ‘where do I belong’ ties into ‘who am I’? Yalda, for example, explained:

So sometimes that can be really confusing, like, who am I then? But I mean ... there’s also a part of me that knows what I like about Iranian culture and about Dutch culture and I can combine those things within myself. But of course, sometimes it would be nice to genuinely feel at home somewhere.

This brief quote captures how Yalda equates ‘feeling at home’ and belonging somewhere with the question of cultural identity. For most of our participants, the turbulent feelings about home and cultural identity arose during their transition to adulthood. Approximately half spoke of the ways they navigated their multiple identities throughout the years without experiencing much tension. Mina, for example, compared it to every other type of identity struggle in the coming-of-age period. The other half clearly experienced distinct and painful struggles regarding their cultural identity. It is striking that all those who struggled, did so between the ages of 17 and 20. Roxanne, for example:

Until I was seventeen ... I didn't feel very confronted with my ... with my being "other." And at some point [...] I began to understand why I was different. Why I had felt different ... All my best friends were Dutch and at some point I just suddenly felt that they couldn't understand me. Really from one moment to the next it changed. Like ... "there is something about me that you will never understand" ... and that created a lot of distance. It was very difficult.

Amine recounted:

You know, the first time I went back to Iran, I was 18 years old. And my life was turned upside down, completely. All of a sudden I discovered what I was. It's a difficult age ... when I got back in the Netherlands after that trip ... it was one of the most difficult periods of my life. I had realized that I was Iranian, I belonged to that place, those were my roots ... that I wasn't the person I was pretending to be here [in the Netherlands].

For many participants, these memories of identity struggle were marked by a lack of empathy from their surroundings. Many participants shared instances where they had been crying in their room because they felt out of place or confused, only to be met by anger rather than empathy from their parents. Most said their parents had had no patience or understanding for their difficulties, telling them to not feel bad and to make use of their opportunities in the Netherlands. This lack of understanding was often compounded by difficulties of being othered in society and a lack of understanding from their native Dutch peers, teachers and friends.

At best, members of the second generation can feel enriched by their heritage and experiences, belong to many places at once and dance masterfully between languages codes, and cultures. At worst, they can sense that they belong nowhere, they can feel excluded by mainstream society, out of place and disadvantaged by their cultural background. In reality these types of experiences may oftentimes overlap, compete or come in phases. This connects to what [Edward Said \(1994\)](#) has referred to as a condition of in-betweenness. He argued that, while the condition of in-betweenness for migrants and refugees could lead to the feeling of disconnectedness, it also has a great potential to lead to originality and creativity because they constantly negotiate their past and present societal contexts ([Said, 1994](#)). Although the children of migrants and refugees

have different positionings towards an ‘imagined cultural past’ compared to their parents, they still have a variety of cultural repertoires as their point of reference (Levitt, 2009, p. 1226). What seems to be quintessential is the impact of societal context on the positioning of younger generations as they negotiate their multiple identities and sources of belonging.

So how were our participants making sense of their multiple identities today? With the exception of one person, who could not at all identify with being ‘Dutch’, all participants had come to a place where they could interact with their Dutch and Iranian identities in a way that either merged or transcended both labels. All participants emphasized that they did not adhere to an either-or fashion of cultural identity. In Donya’s words: ‘I wouldn’t be able to ever choose ... it’s like choosing between your mother and your father, it’s like Sophie’s choice,<sup>3</sup> and I don’t think it should be necessary to choose’. Niloe shared the following story:

I have a close friend now, she’s Dutch ... She sent me a story [...] ... about an Iranian girl who feels like she doesn’t belong ... and she has a Dutch boyfriend and he doesn’t understand her at all, so he goes to Iran to try to learn more about her culture ... and he comes back and he says, “She transcends cultures and borders” ... you can’t place her here, nor there. I was really touched, because it really resonated with me. It’s compared to a river that begins in Kazakhstan and streams all the way till here ... you can’t define its borders, where it belongs.

Sania shared her perspective on the advantages of being ‘fluent’ in more than one culture:

I can’t say that I feel fully Dutch. I feel Iranian and Dutch, both. I try to take the best of both worlds [laughs]. It’s a great advantage ... to know two cultures like that. It’s just like knowing a second language. And you can empathize more with people ... you can step into their perspective.

The different ways that these young women embrace the multiplicity in their lives is striking. Some refer to the importance of different languages and cultures as a competence that increases their ability to empathize and

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<sup>3</sup>For an explanation of ‘Sophie’s choice’, see: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084707/synopsis>. Retrieved on 2 July 2017.

understand people, some consider their condition of ‘being a migrant’ and ‘having had rich experiences’ as a source of experiential enrichment. Niloe even compared her positioning to ‘a river without borders’ that does not want to be defined by static categories but considers itself as a stream of mobility. In every account it was clear that an either-or identity is in no way a representative framework for how our respondents experience cultural identity. In Maral’s words: ‘I’m getting to know myself, the person I am, and I don’t need to label it. My life has shaped me ... Am I more Iranian, more Dutch? I don’t know. I’m Maral!’ These findings contest the popular notion in the Dutch dominant discourse that immigrants need to choose one cultural identity and leave the other behind.

## Conclusion

This study investigated patterns that marked the intergenerational and societal relationships of second-generation Iranian-Dutch women, against the backdrop of the post-9/11 Dutch political landscape. One such pattern was that of the immigrant bargain: the first-generation’s expectation that their children will be educationally and professionally successful, thereby repaying for the hardships their immigrant parents endured. Most participants kept their end of this bargain to the extent that they were all educationally successful and active members of society. However, all rejected the narrow range of professions (doctor, lawyer or engineer) their parents’ generation typically associated with prestige. At the same time, most participants were grateful for this drive they inherited from their parents. They believed it had contributed to their personal resilience in a society where, as migrants, they had to work harder to prove themselves than did their native Dutch counterparts.

A surprising finding was that many participants displayed a sense of solidarity with other ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands, such as the Moroccan-Dutch. This contrasts with the first generation Iranian-Dutch, who often explicitly distance themselves from other migrant groups (Alinejad & Ghorashi, 2016; Ghorashi, 2011). Participants felt a commonality with all other ethnic minorities due to being othered by the dominant Dutch society. This shows how othering practices contribute to new forms of identification with and solidarity-based belonging to other ethnic minority groups.

Despite being fully integrated into Dutch society, participants said to be regularly approached and labelled as an *allochtoon*, a foreigner, often based purely on their appearance. This was another striking finding: that

the embodiment of ethnicity is indeed a source of othering, labelling or exclusion for the second generation. Our study indicates a role for the embodiment of ethnic disadvantage (or a racial component to ethnicity) for a generation of Iranian-Dutch considered to be the successful children of immigrants. Thus, despite the denial of racism in the Netherlands, the culturalist discourse of othering has a clear racial angle.

The biographies of these women show the simultaneous presence of contradictory demands in the various contexts they are part of: their (emotional) processes and choices are challenged by their parents, while their Dutch-ness is challenged by society. Regardless, they show resilience by embracing the multiplicity of their identities and resources, thus paving eclectic routes and sites of belonging. These different routes underline that belonging is a contested experience: the multilayered, plural and at times contradictory experiences and feeling of belonging are in perpetual tension with demands of conformity to monolinear ideas of what it means to be Dutch.

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